CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

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ENGLISH

FINAL RECORD OF THE EIGHT HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FOURTH PLENARY MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 6 July 2000, at 10.15 a.m.

President: Mr. Celso Amorim (Brazil)

GE.00-62102 (E)

The PRESIDENT: I declare open the 854th plenary meeting of the Conference.

(continued in French)

The Permanent Mission of France to the Conference has informed us of the sudden death of Mr. François Rhein. Mr. Rhein served as Counsellor with the Permanent Mission of France from 1996 to 1999, during which years his skill, his background knowledge and his personal qualities were appreciated by us one and all. I am sure that you will wish to join me in asking Ambassador de la Fortelle to convey to the family of the deceased our deepest sympathy and our sincere condolences.

(continued in English)

I should now like to extend a warm welcome to the Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala, who is attending the plenary meeting today despite his heavy involvement in the current session of the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters. His presence among us yet again today testifies to his abiding interest in the future of this Conference.

There is no speaker inscribed on my list for today. Does any delegation wish to take the floor? South Africa has the floor.

Mr. MARKRAM (South Africa): Mr. President, at the outset may I congratulate you on your assumption of the Presidency of the Conference on Disarmament. It is a rare occasion that the Conference has the privilege of the same distinguished Ambassador presiding over its work twice. My delegation is convinced that Brazil will build upon the diligent and untiring efforts of Ambassador Lint of Belgium and that your ample experience may guide us through this difficult period in the Conference on Disarmament.

I have asked for the floor to recall a media statement on the decision to destroy South Africa's redundant stockpile of small arms, which was circulated as document CD/1573 on 4 March 1999, and to inform the Conference that the physical destruction of the South African National Defence Force's stockpile of redundant small arms and spare parts has commenced today.

In a continent where recent conflicts have mainly been fought with small arms and light weapons and many of these weapons acquired from surplus stockpiles elsewhere, the destruction of over a quarter million redundant small arms forms part of the Government's comprehensive strategy to prevent, combat and eradicate the excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms. An integral part of this strategy is to destroy such redundant and obsolete weapons rather than selling them, as an important preventative measure. These weapons became redundant because of the availability of more advanced technology, or were confiscated by the South African National Defence Force during military operations.

(Mr. Markram, South Africa)

I also wish to take this opportunity to thank the Government of Norway for its cooperation and generous assistance, which made it possible to undertake the destruction of these weapons.

I have circulated with this statement a copy taken from a media statement to be issued in South Africa today, outlining the technical details of the destruction process. It would be appreciated if the text of that statement could be circulated as an official document of the Conference.

The PRESIDENT (translated from Spanish): Chile has asked for the floor. I give the floor to Chile.

Ms. CHAHÍN (Chile) (translated from Spanish): Mr. President, the delegation of Chile, on behalf of which it has been my honour to speak during the current session, wishes to congratulate you on your assumption of the presidency of the Conference on Disarmament. It does so, furthermore, with the fellow feeling that a sister country like Brazil merits, a country which we hold close to our heart and with which we share not only interests but also our aspiration for a better and safer world, in which democracy shall prevail and human rights shall be properly respected.

We wish you the very best of success and we undertake to give you all our support in the conduct of your work.

We would also like to inform the Conference on Disarmament that the National Congress of the Republic of Chile has finalized the constitutional procedures for the approval of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, which we shall finally be ratifying in the near future.

In this manner, we reaffirm our unswerving commitment to the cause of disarmament and international security, which we regard not as ends in themselves but as instruments placed at the service of humankind, of people, who represent the guiding principle behind our Government's policies.

The PRESIDENT (translated from Spanish): I thank the distinguished representative of Chile for her statement and for the kind words addressed to the Chair.

(continued in English)

I want also to thank the representative of South Africa for his generous references to me. I do not see any other request for the floor. If that is so, let me also make some opening remarks with regard to my presidency.

First of all, I would like to pay tribute to the strenuous efforts of my friend, Ambassador Jean Lint of Belgium, as well as of the other colleagues who have assumed this high office this year, in trying to bridge the differences that still prevent us from agreeing on a programme of work. Their full commitment notwithstanding, this Conference has been unable,

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after 16 weeks in session, to embark on any substantive work. This is certainly not a time for long statements. The short number - and sometimes even the absence - of statements in our meetings is testimony to the current mood in this forum. Although the Conference on Disarmament has lived through other "identity crises", the present one appears to be more serious. Overcoming it will require a new sense of engagement.

Ambassador Lint has generously recalled that this is the second time I have served at the helm of the Conference. I do not know if this is a sign of bureaucratic longevity or is due to some other fortuitous circumstances. I can assure you, however, and especially the many young delegates with a promising career in disarmament, that I do not intend to benefit from this privilege when, in the next decade, Brazil's turn to preside over this august body comes round once again.

In January 1993, I had just come from Paris where I had signed the Chemical Weapons Convention on behalf of my Government. That was an unprecedented, remarkable agreement - the first, as we all know, to proscribe an entire category of weapons of mass destruction in a comprehensive and verifiable manner.

Only two days after the opening of the 1993 session, we were able to agree on the agenda and on the establishment of four ad hoc committees. During that month, the Conference on Disarmament was able to produce a consensus document with comments on the United Nations Secretary-General's report entitled "New Dimensions of Arms Regulation and Disarmament in the Post-Cold War Era".

Certainly, in the early 1990s, the window of opportunity generated by the end of bipolar confrontation still seemed wide open. The Conference on Disarmament succeeded in taking advantage of that favourable context and advanced some important agreements. The prevailing atmosphere was, incidentally, reflected in the document which contained the Conference's reaction to Dr. Boutros-Ghali's reports: "The new conditions of international security reinforce the relevance of disarmament and arms regulation, because they facilitate the conclusion of new bilateral and multilateral agreements that would establish and codify security at lower levels of armaments".

Ours is a different political environment, and many concerns have been expressed over policies, actions or, in some cases, lack of action by important actors. My own Government, in statements made at this Conference, was among those which expressed frustration in the face of this reversal of the positive momentum. While progress was achieved bilaterally or unilaterally, there were clear setbacks which have had a significant impact on the pursuit of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

In my view, two considerations must be borne in mind in relation to how we could and should deal with the current deadlock in the Conference.

First, it is imperative that we build upon recent political steps, which are particularly meaningful for this forum. For the first time, at the NPT Review Conference, the five

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nuclear-weapon States assumed an unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. A specific and detailed programme of action was set up, comprising previously agreed steps and a number of new ones, thus providing for a checklist against which progress can be measured in the coming years. Among these, it is noteworthy that the Conference on Disarmament was called upon to establish a subsidiary body to deal with nuclear disarmament.

This important political message must be translated into urgent action. The groundbreaking commitments, the spirit of compromise and the sense of responsibility towards the future of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation must be pursued here as well as in other places. This certainly requires concerted high-level attention to the current logjam faced by this Conference.

Such attention, however, seems to be lacking.

The continued paralysis of the Conference on Disarmament cannot but cast doubt over the value of progress achieved elsewhere. For reasons that may be understandable, yet not necessarily justifiable, breaking the impasse in the Conference does not seem to enjoy the same degree of priority as avoiding failure in other disarmament-related events.

This, I would contend, is a mistake.

If the main multilateral negotiating body remains paralysed, the very same forces, whose unleashing was feared, will be operating. Confidence in the future of disarmament and non-proliferation will be eroded.

Second, the Conference on Disarmament will naturally continue to be influenced by and responsive to developments on the international strategic scene which affect the security interests of individual member States. It would be naive to think otherwise. But the Conference on Disarmament does not have a passive role only. This is a dialectical relationship. If the Conference is capable of initiating meaningful work, it will to some degree have a positive influence on policies, decisions and developments outside its framework.

Much time has been spent on the question of the negotiating nature of certain mandates. I do not mean to underestimate the weight of some words and the commitment they may imply. But, as is often recalled, the Conference on Disarmament is a negotiating body. Any issue being discussed has to be seen in that light. Substantive discussions in the Conference do not of necessity entail immediate negotiations, in the sense of treaty-making. Nor should they be viewed as precluding such negotiations. Often, the preparation of the conceptual and technical groundwork made possible by in-depth discussions is in itself pre-negotiation.

I outline these thoughts without any illusion as to the difficulties of reaching compromise solutions when vital security issues are involved. But most of us here have been witness to other situations, here or in other forums, in which, in spite of crucial, substantive divergences, it was possible to "organize differences" in a way that did not prevent equally important goals, which

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were held in common, from being obtained. The real question which we face is this: is it or is it not true that, in spite of our diverging priorities and concerns, we all share the same vested interest in reinforcing the multilateral machinery for disarmament and non-proliferation? And, if this is the case, how far are we prepared to go in displaying the necessary flexibility to allow for constructive solutions that do not jeopardize perceived vital interests?

As with the characters in a Chekhov play, whose lives wither away in front of us, in the midst of a sense of powerlessness and lost hopes, the substance and spirit of the Conference on Disarmament are on the decline.

As in many other diplomatic processes, or in life itself, it is not always easy to pinpoint the moment in which deterioration becomes irreversible. Although many concerns have been expressed on the paralysis of the Conference on Disarmament, a sense of crisis and, therefore, of urgency is not clearly perceptible.

It is incumbent on the members of this body to act, if necessary by raising the level of attention to the situation of the Conference on Disarmament in their own capitals. Given existing differences, it is only from an acute perception of such crisis, and the risks it carries for disarmament and non-proliferation, that solutions may be found to our problems. It is our hope that full use will be made of the inter-sessional period ahead of us for thorough reflection on this situation, as well as for contacts and consultations, so that, when we reconvene in August, we may be closer to an agreement on our programme of work.

You can be assured that, for my part, I will spare no effort to promote real and meaningful progress towards that end. I need hardly emphasize that the Presidency will be available at all times for consultations. Any constructive advice will, of course, be most welcome.

This concludes our business for today and the second part of our annual session. The next plenary meeting of the Conference will be held on Thursday, 10 August 2000, at 10 a.m.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.